

An Awakened Sinner Soundly Converted

By E. A. Johnston

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Bible Text: Romans 1:16

Preached On: Wednesday, July 24, 2013

Ambassadors For Christ Intl-USA

1335 Terrell Mill Road

Bldg 1462, Suite 100

Marietta, GA 30067

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/9225

We live in a day of great spiritual declension and a diluted Gospel. Many are joining churches but few are truly saved. Seldom is a message preached on the vast distinction between a sincere convert and a false professor. The pulpits have made it so easy to come to Christ that very few ever get savingly converted. Therefore, many congregations are made up of a majority of church members who are on a false bottom and rest in a false security. Sadly, many sit in churches in spiritual darkness for want of a faithful minister to warn them to flee from the wrath to come. Because of the gross spiritual decay in the churches, the standard has fallen to such low levels that many are deceived into believing that they are truly converted and on their way to heaven when in reality when they come to die, they enter eternity apart from Christ and awake in a burning hell full of torments and terrors.

Few know how to preach effectively to awaken sinners to their ruined condition. Fewer still, understand the preparatory work of the Spirit of God of conviction and humiliation upon the souls of men before they are truly brought to Christ. Heresy is all around us, hell is open before us and antichrist is soon upon us and it will be too late for the majority of church members in the land who remain in their sins and die apart from a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Allow me to read you an account of a church member who was soundly converted under the preaching of Asahel Nettleton during the second Great Awakening. This account is taken from my biography on Nettleton entitled "Asahel Nettleton: Revival Preacher." What makes this account so startling is the first hand description of how this man comes to Christ and it is entirely opposite of our modern-day attempts at evangelism that we are familiar with today. The singularity of this account lies in the personal contact that this church member had with Nettleton when Nettleton came to his Presbyterian church in Jamaica, New York on Long Island. Nettleton was suffering illness from a bout with typhus fever and this man drove the evangelist around in his horse-drawn carriage for the frequent rides in the open air were good for Nettleton's health. The year was 1826 and it was a time in America when God was moving mightily in revival and spiritual awakening.

Listen to this man's account as he relates how he came savingly to Christ under Nettleton's powerful ministry. I beg you, listen carefully to the stages this man passes

through as the Spirit of God operates on his heart and conscience as he was first awakened to his ruined condition then convicted of his sins, then he passes into a period of true humility and brokenness before coming gloriously to Christ in a sound conversion. Here now are his words. I implore you, friends, to listen to them carefully.

“In perusing the life of Mr. Nettleton, I have had brought vividly to my recollections scenes and circumstances connected with the revival of religion in Jamaica in 1826 of deep interest to me and although more than 18 years have passed, their interest is as deep as ever and I think strikingly illustrates the wisdom and the prudence of that wonderful man in dealing with awakened sinners.

“The first time I saw Mr. Nettleton was on a Communion Sabbath in the early part of the winter of 1826. Two strangers entered the church and walking slowly up the aisle, seated themselves in the front pew. Many eyes were fastened upon them and after service, as is common in the country, many inquiries were made as to who they were for they were evidently clergymen. It was some time before I learned that one of them was the Reverend Mr. Nettleton, the great revival preacher. The church in Jamaica, as is mentioned in the memoir, had been greatly divided. We were literally two bands hostile to each other and bitter in feeling. The Apostle might have said of us, We were hateful and hating one another and there seemed but little prospect of our ever being any better. It was a sad spectacle on that day presented to this man of God.

“When a few days after, I heard that Mr. Nettleton, the revival preacher, was soon going to preach for us I never shall forget my feelings. I determined I would not hear him and especially so when an old disciple, long since in glory, Mr. Othniel Smith who had listened with rapture to George Whitfield 70 years before when he preached in Jamaica, said to me, ‘This Mr. Nettleton that is going to preach for us is a most wonderful man. He is said to be the greatest preacher that has been among us since the days of George Whitfield.’ He said further that from what he had heard of him, he believed he could almost read a man’s heart. So wonderful was his knowledge of human nature.

“I well remember I secretly said, ‘He shall not see my heart for I will not let him see me.’ So bitterly did I dread anything like close experimental preaching. I had long been a professor of religion, having united with the Rutger’s Street Church in 1812 while Dr. Mildollar was the pastor. And notwithstanding, I had always been outwardly consistent, regularly observing secret and family prayer, constant in my attendance upon all the meetings of the church as well as the public services of the Sabbath as the weekly lecturer and the social circles of prayer and active in all the benevolent operations of the day. Notwithstanding all this seemingly consistency of character, there was always a fearful whisper from the faithful monitor within that all was not right. There was a secret dread of self-examination and unwillingness to know the worst respecting my case and the idea of coming in contact with a man who would be likely to expose my shallowness if not hypocrisy, I could not endure and accordingly I resolved that something should detain me from church when Mr. Nettleton preached. But although I sought diligently for any excuse, one evening the last plausible, yet I could not find one and contrary to my secret determination, I went to church at the appropriate time with my family.

“After the Sabbath, numbers of the church members called upon Mr. Nettleton at his lodgings to welcome him among us and I was repeatedly requested to do so with the rest. But day after day I contrived to excuse myself although I knew it was a civility that was expected of me. At length, a brother who had often urged me to go, called upon me to know if I would not take Mr. Nettleton a little ride in my gig as he was in feeble health having but just recovered from a protracted illness adding that he found riding not only beneficial but necessary and he knew I could do it just as well as not. I shall never forget my feelings at this proposition. I at first refused outright and was vexed that the proposition should have been made. I treated the brother rudely. He, however, continued to urge and said he had gone so far as to tell Mr. Nettleton he knew I would do it cheerfully. But it was all to no purpose. I did not do it that day but consented to call upon him the next morning with my gig at 10 o’clock if he would be ready.

“The next morning accordingly, I called at the appointed time and was introduced to him on the sidewalk and never did culprit dread the face of his judge more than I dreaded to be brought face-to-face with a man who it was said could almost read the heart. I received him politely and we soon entered into a pleasing conversation about almost anything and everything except personal religion. This I scrupulously avoided. I found he was in feeble health and somewhat given to hypochondria, therefore, I felt assured I could entertain him by talking about his own ailments. In less than one hour, all my unpleasant feelings had vanished and I felt as free and easy with him as if I was riding with some long-trying friend and that which I so much dreaded became to me at once a source of great pleasure and of much profit.

“The first day he rode with me about six miles and after that for seven months very few pleasant days passed that we did not ride together from 5-25 miles. I became deeply interested in him as a man and as a preacher. Why I at first liked his preaching, I cannot exactly say but I was unwilling to be absent from a single meeting. The class of subjects he chose as his theme of discourse was new. The distracted state of the congregation led those clergymen who supplied our pulpit to select some subjects connected with Christian duty. Brotherly love, if I remember right, was the subject of discourse seven times in about three months. On the contrary, Mr. Nettleton presented the claims of God and the duty of sinners and here I remember we had no opportunity of scrutinizing the sermon to endeavor to ascertain on which side of the division the preacher was. This I considered a master stroke of policy.

“Thus smoothly and pleasantly, comparatively speaking, it passed along with me for about two weeks when one evening he announced from the desk that he felt some encouragement to believe that the Lord was about to grant us a blessing. He said that he had seen several individuals who were anxious for their souls and two or three who indulged hope. How it would end with them he could not say, but he wanted the church to walk softly before the Lord and to be much in prayer. I felt that my own case required looking into at once or I was lost and I resolved soon to attend it, not to let the present opportunity pass. Mr. Nettleton had never yet said one word to me on the subject of experimental religion although I had been with him a great deal.

“The next day, as usual, I called for him to ride. I was obliged to go to Flushing that day, distant about five miles. Just as we were ascending the hill, a little out of the village and before any subject of conversation had been introduced and the horse on a slow walk, he gently placed his hand upon my knee and said, ‘Well, my dear friend, how is it with you? I hope it is all peace within.’ I could not speak for some minutes. He said no more and there was no occasion for an arrowhead pierced my inmost soul. My emotion was overwhelming. At length, after recovering a little of self-possession, I broke the silence by telling him frankly I was not happy. There was no peace within, rather all was war, war, war.

“His manner was so kind. He instantly won my confidence and I unburdened my soul to him. I told him how I had felt for years past and how very unhappy at times I had been. He did not seem inclined to talk. All he said was occasionally, ‘Well. Well. Well.’ with his peculiar cadence. At length, he said he did not feel very well and he wanted to be still. This was a request he often made and I thought nothing of it. I have rode miles and miles with him and not a word has passed between us after such a request.

“I continued to ride with him once and twice a day but although I was anxious to converse, he said but little to me except occasionally he would drop a remark calculated to make me feel worse instead of better, at times, greatly deepening my distress.

“Some months afterwards, I spoke to him about this part of our intercourse. He said he did it intentionally for he had reason to believe many an awakened sinner had his convictions all talked away and talked into a false hope.

“Two or three days after he first spoke to me on the subject of religion, he called at my house and requested me to go and see a particular individual who he named and who was under distress of mind and pray with her. I told him that I could not do such a thing as that for I was not a Christian myself. He replied, ‘But you do not mean that your not being a Christian releases you from Christian obligations? If you do, you are greatly in error. Good morning.’ And he left me rather abruptly.

“In the afternoon when I rode with him, he did not ask me if I attended to his request for he knew I had not. He only made the request, as he afterwards told me, to thrust deeper the arrow of conviction and it had the desired effect. My distress became very great and I was unfitted for my ordinary duties. I felt as if there was but little hope for such a hardened sinner as I was.

“About this time, he appointed a meeting of inquiry. I told him I should be there for one. He said I must not attend on any account, it was only intended for anxious sinners. I told him I certainly should be there unless he absolutely forbade it. ‘I do,’ said he with more than ordinary earnestness. ‘Then,’ said I, ‘you must promise me that you will appoint a meeting for anxious professors.’ He made no reply.

“This anxious meeting was the first to be appointed in Jamaica. It was to be held at the house of a dear friend of mine and one who knew something of the state of my mind. I

went there in the afternoon and made arrangements to be concealed in an adjoining bedroom the door of which could not be shut, the bed being placed against it. I was on the ground an hour before the time appointed.

“Mr. Nettleton came soon after to arrange the seats. About this he was very particular. He came into the bedroom where I was concealed two or three times. He wanted the door closed but he found it could not be without disarranging the furniture and he gave it up. He did not know I was there until some weeks afterwards. The temptations to be present at that meeting I could not resist. Somehow I had received an impression that my salvation depended upon it. I heard so often about persons being converted in an anxious meeting that I thought if I could only be present at such a meeting, that was all that was necessary and, therefore, I was willing not only to run the risk of offending Mr. Nettleton but willing to submit to almost any humiliating circumstances to accomplish my object. I thought it was altogether a piece of cruelty in Mr. Nettleton to forbid my being present and I determined to carry my point privately if I could not openly.

“Situated as I was, I could hear next to nothing as to what was transpiring in the anxious room. Mr. Nettleton addressed those present individually and in a very low tone of voice bordering upon a whisper. When he approached the open door I could occasionally catch a sentence and hear a deep and anxious sob but these words and broken sentences and sobs were loud and pointed sermons to me.

“I wanted to get out from my hiding place that I might give vent to my pent up feelings. In my anxiety, to be released appeared to be greater than it was to be present. At times, it seemed as if I must cry out in bitterness of spirit. So agonizing were my feelings, especially so as I heard him say to one individual, ‘Is it possible? Well, I am afraid you will lose your impressions and if you should, what will become of you if the Spirit is grieved to return no more? You will lose your soul.’

“After going around the room and conversing with each individual, he made a few general remarks applicable to all respecting the danger of grieving God’s Holy Spirit and then dismissed the meeting after a short prayer. Instead of feeling any better after this meeting as I expected to do, I felt worse and worse. Sleep was now taken from me and I felt that death was better than life.

“Either that night or the next, I forget which but remember it was the 27th of April, I got out of bed about 12 o’clock and went out into the woods. It was exceedingly dark. I fell down at the foot of a tree and cried aloud for mercy in agony of soul. I felt that God was just in punishing me. I felt that the longest and the severest punishment he could inflict was no more than I deserved. My sins, my aggravated sins appeared so great.

“I remained out of doors the most of the night. In the morning, early, before I went home, I called at Mr. Nettleton’s lodgings. He sent word that he could not see me at that hour. I went away and returned in an hour or so. He told the servant to request me to be seated and he would be with me in a few minutes. Every minute now seemed an hour and a long

one too. For nearly 30 minutes he kept me in this state of horrible suspense during which I was constantly pacing the floor with my watch in my hand.

“When at length he entered the room, I threw my arms around his neck, told him I was in perfect agony and that I should die if he did not in some way comfort me. I told him it seemed as if I could not live another hour in such distress. ‘I can’t help you, my dear friend. You must not look to me,’ and he burst into a flood of tears. ‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’ I repeated over and over again in a loud voice. ‘You must yield your heart to Christ or you are lost,’ said he, and adding, ‘I do certainly think your situation a very alarming and dangerous one.’

“After a few minutes he said, ‘Come. Let us kneel down.’ This was contrary to his usual practice. He made a very short prayer, not more than a minute in length, rose from his knees, advised me to go home and remain in my room and abruptly left me almost overcome with emotion. Had there been any means of self-destruction within my reach, I believe I should have employed it, so agonizing were my feelings.

“He sent word to me by a young friend that he did not wish to ride that day. I passed the most of the day in my room on my knees. Occasionally, I walked for a few minutes in my garden and then returned to my room. It was the just and eternal displeasure of an angry God that seemed to crush me to the earth.

“About the middle of the afternoon, one of the elders came to see me. He expressed surprise at my distress, said there was no necessity for my feeling so bad. He knew there was not. He tried to persuade me all would be well with me soon. I told him that if he could satisfy me, it would ever be well with me. I would gladly and cheerfully endure my sufferings thousands of years. This feeling I distinctly remember, the justice of God and the eternity of his anger distressed me most. I sent for Mr. Nettleton but he excused himself and did not come. Thus, every refuge failed me and all my hopes were crossed.

“It was past the middle of the afternoon and approaching sundown and I had not yet broken my fast. After a short walk in the garden, I again entered my room, locked the door and threw myself prostrate on my settee near a state of hopeless despair as I can conceive a mortal to be on this side of the bottomless pit. I cried aloud, ‘O my God! How long? How long? O my God! My God!’

“After repeating this and similar language several times, I seemed to sink away into a state of insensibility. When I came to myself, I was upon my knees praying not for myself but for others. I felt submission to the will of God, willing that he should do with me as should seem good in his sight. My concern for myself seemed all lost in concern for others. Terror seemed all exchanged for love and despair for hope, that God was glorious and Christ unspeakably precious. I was overwhelmingly wondering to myself. The cry of ‘Blessed Jesus!’ took the place of ‘Lord, have mercy!’

“After remaining in my room half an hour or thereabouts, I came downstairs and met my dear wife who had deeply sympathized with me in my distress. I explained, ‘I have found

him! I have found him and he is a precious Savior!’ She was very much overcome. She persuaded me to take some food but I was so happy and so anxious to go to meeting the bell having rung, that I could eat but little.

“I went over to the session house. It was crowded. Benches in the aisles were filled. I obtained a seat near the door. Mr. Nettleton was reading the 211 hymn of the Village Collection:

“Of all the joys we mortals know,
Jesus thy love exceeds the rest.

“I thought I never heard so sweet a hymn nor so delightful music. I sung it at the top of my voice of which, however, I was not aware until I saw I had attracted the observation of all near me. My eyes were streaming with tears while my countenance was beaming with delight as a friend afterwards told me. I wanted to tell all around me what a Savior I had found.

“After service, I walked home with Mr. Nettleton and remained with him a few minutes. ‘I knew this morning,’ said he, ‘that the turning point was not far off.’ He cautioned me again and again against giving way to my feelings, urged me to keep humble and prayerful and not to say much to anyone.

“That night I could not sleep for joy. I do not think I closed my eyes. I found myself singing several times in the night. In the morning, all nature seemed in a new dress and vocal with the praises of a God all glorious. Everything seemed changed and I could scarcely realize that one only yesterday so wretched was now so happy. I felt it perfectly reasonable that he who had much forgiven should love much. I think I sincerely inquired, ‘Lord, what will thou have me to do?’

“And though 18 years have now passed, God is still glorious and Christ still precious to my soul and unless I am greatly deceived, I still pray for a knowledge of my duty and for the grace to do it. I know that I still love to do good and make others happy and of all anticipated delights which I can place before my mind, that of the enjoyment of sinless perfection and heaven is the greatest, but never was a sense of my unworthiness greater than it is at present.”